

DIOCESAN NEWS

Fr. O'Malley prefers new 'Exorcist' to '73 flick

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Father William O'Malley, SJ, remembered authoring a review of William Peter Blatty's novel *The Exorcist*, about a 12-year-old girl who was possessed, in which he criticized the way Jesuits were portrayed by the author.

"These Jesuits are too cutesy and flip," Father O'Malley recalled thinking. Sometimes, Jesuits can even be "boring," he noted in a phone interview from Fordham Prep in the Bronx, where he teaches.

Blatty, who had attended Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution, contacted Father O'Malley and arranged to meet him. He was interested in learning more about the point of view of this priest, then teaching at McQuaid Jesuit High School in Rochester.

The flattered Father O'Malley said that when he met Blatty over a meal, he nearly outdid himself trying to make an intelligent impression on the famed author. Finally, Blatty said to Father O'Malley: "Do you know what you've been for the last 20 minutes?"

"Yeah, cutesy and flip," Father O'Malley responded.

The exchange led to Father O'Malley landing a small role as Father Dyer in "The



Exorcist," the Academy Award winning 1973 film that has since become a benchmark against which other horror films are measured. The Warner Brothers movie was re-released in October with 12 minutes of footage added that had originally been cut from the film.

As Father Dyer, Father O'Malley is seen playing a piano at a house party in the movie, and in a few other scenes as Father Damien Karras' friend. In the new version, Father O'Malley is also more prominent in the movie's last scene, which is now more faithful to the ending in the book than the original movie was.

When asked about the new version, Father O'Malley said he liked the restoration of one scene, where Father Karras (Jason Miller) and Father Lankester Merrin (Max von Sydow), the two exorcists, discuss why Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair) had been possessed. Father Merrin speculates that the devil wasn't attacking her so much as attacking the idea that God loves us, making us think that humans are vile and animal and not worth God's attention.

"I think there's a lot more spiritual dimension to the whole thing," Father O'Malley said of the film's new version. "Up to (now) the director had pretty much



Warner Bros./CNS

Linda Blair, Max von Sydow and Jason Miller star in the 1973 film "The Exorcist."

made it a scary movie. There was no thesis to the whole thing ... The goal of the possessor is not the girl. He wants to get the priest."

An English and theology teacher at McQuaid from 1967-86, Father O'Malley, 59, a Buffalo native, has authored 30 books, including *Meeting the Living God*, a catechism text that thousands of high school students have used. He has written numerous articles and directed 89 plays and musicals. Yet, despite his many catechetical, literary, journalistic and theatrical achievements, the priest acknowledged that he is probably best known for his role in "The Exorcist." Father O'Malley, who also served as a technical adviser to the moviemakers, said the film gave him a "spurious credibility," garnering him high-paying speaking engagements for years afterward (he always gave the fees to his order) and the never-ending interest of generations of his students.

"It's like if you're in a movie, you've all of a sudden have got some insight into life," he said, noting that in the months after "The Exorcist" premiered, he was a guest on such TV talk shows as "Today" with Barbara Walters.

The priest added that he had some interesting discussions on the set of "The Exorcist" with various Hollywood types intrigued by his vocation, his vow of celibacy and his thoughts on God. He presided at a Mass for the cast and crew on Thanksgiving Day, and recalled the experience as

quite moving.

"A carpenter came up to me with tears in his eyes and said: 'Father, this is the first Mass I've been to in 10 years.'"

Father O'Malley said the cast and crew treated him well, and the experience of being a movie actor was "an ego trip."

Fame had its downside, he said, noting that in Rochester, he got calls from people wanting him to exorcise "their cat or their dog or their house." He often told people that if they remembered, in the film, both priest-exorcists die after they perform their exorcisms.

"If you think I'm going to come over to your house and take the devil out of your cat and jump out of a window, you're crazy," he said to such callers.

He added that *The Exorcist* as a book and a movie were valuable in that they took evil as a force seriously. He added that while he's researched demonic possession, he still has questions about what exactly the devil is. He did note that he doesn't think anyone should play with Ouija boards, as Linda Blair's character did in the movie, because they may put board players in danger of encountering negative forces. And he added that he is convinced that evil is a real force that is evidenced in such phenomenon as the brutal murders that, unfortunately, have become almost commonplace in the modern world.

"I wouldn't go to the wall for the existence of the devil," he said. "On the other hand, I wouldn't say there isn't one."

Clinton visit to St. Michael's elicits condemnation, praise

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

In the aftermath of the visit of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate in New York, to St. Michael's Church, Rochester, parishes have been informed that the visit was a clear violation of diocesan policy.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark sent an Oct. 31 letter to parishes stating "diocesan policy remains that we do not endorse candidates or appear to endorse candidates."

Clinton visited St. Michael's on Oct. 29, and Bishop Matthew H. Clark denounced her visit in a press statement the next day. Several protesters both inside and outside the church were outraged by the appearance of a political candidate in a Catholic church, and by the fact that Clinton is a well-known advocate of legalized abortion.

During Clinton's talk at the parish, protesters attempted to disrupt her appearance by talking loudly or singing, and were either asked to leave by people in the church, or escorted or taken out by Rochester city police, according to several observers. No arrests were made.

During 11:30 a.m. Mass on Nov. 5, about a dozen people reportedly held a prayer vigil outside the church to call attention to their opposition to the Clinton visit.

According to local Democratic Party officials, the Clinton visit was done with the permission of St. Michael's pastor Father Dennis Shaw. Party officials added that parish officials said they would also welcome Clinton's opponent, Republican Rick Lazio.

Father Shaw did not respond to phone calls or an e-mail sent to him by the *Catholic Courier* about Clinton's visit. Michael Tedesco, diocesan director of communications, said diocesan officials had spoken to Father Shaw about the visit, but he added that he was not privy to the nature of the discussion.

After Bishop Clark voiced his criticism of the visit, the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*, the local daily newspaper, published a Nov. 1 editorial that criticized Bishop Clark's contention that the Clinton visit could be construed as an endorsement.

"It is something of a leap to suggest that

allowing parishioners to see and hear a candidate is tantamount to support for that candidate," the editorial read.

In a similar fashion, Denise-Marie Santiago, an editorial writer for the daily, noted that many in the primarily Hispanic community that surrounds St. Michael's could not understand the outcry surrounding the Clinton visit. The First Lady, she wrote Nov. 2, was visiting a neighborhood heretofore ignored by other persons of her stature, Santiago wrote, adding that it's a neighborhood marked by low voter turnout. The visit could work to increase turnout, she wrote. She also noted that the protesters both inside and outside the church during Clinton's visit were not from the neighborhood.

"(The) diocese's very public irritation with the church's pastor (should not) overshadow what's at stake," she wrote. "Anything that gets parishioners involved in the election process should be applauded. It benefits the community and, by extension, the parish itself."

Bishop Clark, however, weighed in with his own piece published in the *Democrat and Chronicle* Nov. 3. As he did in his letter to parishes on the Clinton visit, the bishop stressed that he urges Catholics to become informed on civic issues, particularly those touching upon the protection of human life from the womb to natural death; social justice for the poor and vulnerable in society; solidarity in communities, nations and the world; and the protection of workers' rights in the areas of wages and working conditions. However, he added, it's one thing for the church to urge Catholics to be good citizens, but another to appear to tell them how to vote.

"To become identified, or seem to become identified, with a particular political party or candidate would diminish (the church's) capacity to address freely and clearly the deep issues that concern us," the bishop wrote. "In addition, such activity would subject the Roman Catholic community — a very large presence here — to charges of undue influence in the political process."

EDITORS' NOTE: The Courier went to press Nov. 7, before election results were reported.

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